

...choosing a fire protection company

Whether you're a business, public organisation or homeowner extending or developing your property, you face stringent legal requirements to make your buildings safe. Fire protection companies all promise to provide life safety systems – but how do you decide which one to use? Your ability to make the right choice depends on correctly assessing the expertise and professionalism of a company, and understanding what level of design, installation, monitoring and maintenance services you will get in return for your investment. Here are the top ten criteria you need to investigate to be confident of making an informed decision.



1 Reputation How long have you been in business?

A company that has been in business for some time will be well-tested and should have a loyal customer base. It is also more likely to be able to weather a difficult economic climate and less likely to fold leaving you to repeat your selection process or write-off any of your investment. Can the company tell you how many customers it has? Can it provide you with customer testimonials?

2 Product knowledge What product ranges do you use?

Try to establish how knowledgeable and up to date your prospective fire protection company is, and find out what product options and choices are available to you. Is the installation tied to a single manufacturer or will you be recommended best-of-breed components, so you can easily replace or add to your system in the future. * Ask what areas of fire safety the company covers – can it integrate smoke and heat detectors with other fire safety equipment, such as emergency lighting or extinguishing systems? Does its integration expertise extend to CCTV or access control to facilitate remote monitoring and safe evacuation? Can it set up refuge areas to help you comply with legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act?

3 Customer-centric, knowledgeable advice How do you decide what is best for me?

A company that sees itself as a trusted advisor should help you meet the legal requirements of the Fire Safety Order for the "responsible person" to "ensure that the premises are safe". Ask for a fire risk assessment so that you can determine what's the best solution for your property – the right solution is the one that will allow you to minimise the combustible risk throughout the different areas of your building and effectively detect and suppress a fire if one occurs. Make sure when you receive your estimate that the company has really listened to your requirements and taken into account your budget and any other constraints you have stipulated. If you are in a listed building, you might want to deal with an installer who has experience working in this kind of environment and understands the challenges it may present.

4 Breadth of service What sort of ongoing customer care do you provide?

Regular monitoring and maintenance of your fire system will ensure peace of mind and should avoid the need for expensive emergency call-outs. Reputable companies will offer a range of service levels to suit your budget. They should be able to offer a committed date and time for maintenance visits. Is there a dedicated customer care team and landline available even out of office hours. Will they come out at weekends? Do they guarantee 24/7 support 365 days a year?

5 Tailored protection Can you offer a system design service in-house?

If you have more complex requirements, you will probably want to choose a fire protection company with a specialist design team, experienced in producing bespoke solutions. The better companies will be accredited by BAFE (British Approval for Fire Equipment) and follow their guidelines for creating CAD (Computer-Aided Design) drawings so that you can visualise the specific risks posed in different areas of your building.

**Find out more about this issue in our white paper "The pros and cons of open and closed protocol fire systems"*

6 Staff quality How do you ensure your employees are competent?

The staff of your chosen installer need to be able to provide sound advice, carry out work efficiently and with minimal impact, and to resolve any issues you may have quickly. How does the company train its staff? Does it have good relationships with, and receive training from, product manufacturers? Is it endorsed by third parties such as fire industry associations or Investors in People, the national standard for investment in training and development? You may also want to check how the company complies with health and safety requirements, and what public and product liability insurance it carries.

7 Responsiveness How quickly can you get back to me?

Asking for a quick turnaround on your quote can be a simple and effective way of assessing how rapidly the company is likely to respond if you need to call on it in future. Can they give you a price the same day or next day? Ask what their process is for responding to problems with your system. Do they guarantee response time? Can they offer any form of remote diagnostics?

8 Total cost of ownership What additional charges am I likely to incur?

Don't automatically plump for the company which comes in with the lowest quote. It is highly likely that a company charging more will also give you more in the long run. In more complex installations, ask for a detailed specification of the equipment and ask whether you will own the equipment or be leasing it. Find out if the cost covers other customer and support features such as technology upgrades, handover training, and ongoing maintenance and monitoring. You should also check how long the warranty lasts and what exactly it covers. What, for example, will happen if something goes wrong with your system and you need it fixing straight away – how much will you be charged?

9 Industry validation What industry accreditations do you have?

If the company has a sound foundation and follows best practices, it should have some sort of industry accreditation. There are several badges that you could look for including, as a minimum, BAFE (British Approval for Fire Equipment) and the NSI (National Security Inspectorate) Fire Gold award, both of which recognise compliance with relevant British and European Standards in fire protection, as well as the requirements of the fire service and the insurance industry. A reputable company will not have any problem with you asking for this information.

10 Testimonials and references Can I speak to your existing customers?

There are two advantages to being put in touch with a company's existing customers. One is that it demonstrates the company's confidence in its work and service. The other is that it gives you an opportunity to delve a bit deeper into what level of service you can expect. Clearly the company is unlikely to get you to speak to someone who says they wouldn't recommend it, but you can look into how smooth the whole process was by asking about aspects such as how the company behaved if they were going to be late – did someone phone to let the client know? Was anything damaged during installation and, if so, did the company make good? Most importantly, would the customer use the company again?

Chris Lewis Fire & Security designs, installs and maintains a complete range of fire and security systems for residential and commercial customers. The company's experience, dedication to customer satisfaction and innovatively designed solutions are reflected in a host of industry awards, including both Best Security Installer and Best IT Initiative accreditation at the Security Excellence Awards.